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ABSTRACT

Many faith communities partner with schools to provide tutoring, safe havens, after-school programs, mentoring, and summer activities; they also inspire their membership to volunteer on behalf of children, youth, and families in the nation's schools. This booklet describes several faith community initiatives in a variety of areas that support children's learning. These areas are: after-school programs, school safety, college planning, and reading. The booklet also lists guidelines for public school/faith community partnerships and reminders for volunteers to consider. (HTH)

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U.S. Department of Education
Partnership for Family Involvement in Education
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How Faith Communities Support Children's Learning in Public Schools

There is a new and growing tone of civility. That's good for America and good for public education. Our public schools should not be the public space for a war on values. When you put schools in the middle, education loses. This is why I am encouraged when people of faith reach out to each other and act on their faith and help raise our children.

Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley
Religion and Education Summit, St. Petersburg, Florida
September 19, 1997

Faith communities, in reaching out and connecting to families and children, often become involved in education in their local community. When Secretary of Education Richard Riley issued the guide *Religious Expression in Public Schools*, he opened the door to education partnerships with faith communities as another effective way to support children's learning.

Across the nation, excellent examples abound of the positive impact that faith communities have in encouraging and enabling families and communities to be involved in children's learning. Many faith communities partner with schools to provide tutoring, safe havens, after-school programs, mentoring, and summer activities. Faith communities often inspire their membership to volunteer on behalf of children, youth, and families in the nation's schools. In this way, community groups, businesses, family organizations, and local government agencies join the partnership, resulting in a broad-based effort to help educate children.

Following are examples of faith communities at work in a variety of areas that support children's learning.

After-school Programs

Faith community leaders can help students stay safe and be productive during the after-school time by starting or supporting extended learning programs in local schools and communities. Such programs provide wholesome activities and help schools and childcare facilities open before and after school and in the summer as community learning centers. By sponsoring alcohol- and drug-free activities, and by providing extracurricular learning opportunities, mentors, internships, and community service work, faith communities are making a difference for youth in their community.

The following are examples of partnerships involving faith communities in activities that support children, youth and families during the after-school hours:

Shiloh Baptist Church

Shiloh Baptist Church (Washington, DC) established a Family Life Center to strengthen and nurture families in the surrounding community, bringing them together for educational, cultural, and recreational activities. One of their educational programs is the Male Youth Enhancement Project, designed to stimulate healthy lifestyles in African American males ages 8-15 by providing positive role models, socialization activities, and educational enrichment. Shiloh/Seaton Elementary School Partnership creates mutual support activities for the children served by the school and the church. The partnership has established a reading tutorial program for children attending Seaton, staffed by volunteers from Shiloh. (Contact: Rev. Justus Reeves, education director, Shiloh Baptist Church, 202/232-4200)

John Hopkins Community Learning Center

Several years ago, racial unrest in the Jordon Park area of St. Petersburg, Florida, brought to the forefront an issue of which many in the community were aware: their youth needed support and attention, particularly in the after-school hours. The Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance (IMA), a coalition formed 24 years earlier, created the Urban Fellowship Mentoring, Tutoring, and Enrichment Program. Pursuing ways to make the after-school hours safe and productive for their young people, the Urban Fellowship Program approached the Pinellas County Schools with ideas and together they found other partners to make their dream a reality. Today, the Urban Fellowship Program, Pinellas County Schools, Juvenile Welfare Board, the National Conference on Community and Justice, and the University of South Florida are partners in a 21st Century Community Learning Center grant, operating the John Hopkins Community Learning Center which provides safe and beneficial after-school and summer activities to middle school youth in Jordon Park. (Contact: Elder Martin Rainey, director, Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance, 727/866-2589)

School Safety

The great majority of America's public schools effectively provide for the safety of children and youth on school grounds. But much remains to be done to make all schools equally safe and to provide for the safety of children in their homes, their communities, and in their passage to and from school. In this time of concern—and even some fear—faith communities can build young people's sense of hope and security by helping parents slow down their lives in order to stay close to their children, particularly during the difficult teenage years, and by helping youth become a part of their communities.

The following examples show the promising effects partnerships can have on their communities in the area of school safety:

Chicago Public Schools Interfaith Community Partnerships

This multicultural interfaith group of religious leaders, brought together by Superintendent Paul Vallis, forms a network assisting local schools in addressing crises in and around the schools, such as student discipline problems, truancy and low attendance rates, school safety concerns, student and staff attitudes, and self-esteem issues. The partnership provides crisis intervention, workshops for parents, character education and values curriculum development, expansion of local school partnerships, safety escorts, sponsorship of radio and TV interviews with public school staff to promote Chicago Public School initiatives, and coordination of a crisis support fund. (Contact: Rev. Dr. Janette Wilson, director, Human Relations, 773/535-1574)

The National Conference for Community and Justice

The NCCJ in the Tampa Bay (FL) region operates Camp Anytown to foster understanding and cooperation among students from diverse backgrounds. Students exposed to this multicultural experience become better prepared to assume leadership roles in U.S. society. Sponsored in cooperation with the school systems of the area, Camp Anytown prepares student participants to organize multicultural clubs in their own schools and participate in monthly follow-up meetings. (Contact: H. Roy Kaplan, executive director, National Conference for Community and Justice Tampa Bay Region, 813/636-8851)

Youth and Police in Partnership

This partnership, sponsored by the United Methodist Church Urban Services, supports neighborhood-based youth initiatives in problem solving, public safety, and trust building. The goal is to bring the resources of the religious community and its members to bear on inner city problems. Through collaborations between successful adults, youth, police and other agencies, the partnership is achieving its goal. Youth and police work together, using a problem-solving methodology, to make their respective neighborhoods safe, clean, attractive, and productive. (Contact: Rev. Wesley Williams, United Methodist Urban Services, 617/266-2122)

College Planning

For years, the college-going rate of lower-income students has lagged far behind the rates for students from higher-income families. Much of the problem stems from the fact that many lower-income families do not know how to plan for a college education, often because they simply never have done it before. Faith communities can play an important role in this process. Through leadership and youth activity programs, faith communities can echo the high standards that schools and families set for students, encourage students to work hard and earn the best grades they can, connect them with mentors who will help them in their studies, and make sure that students and their families know about financial aid opportunities.

The example below illustrates how faith communities can be a key player in ensuring that every child has the opportunity to pursue his or her dreams:

Religion and Education Summit

A Religion and Education Summit, held at Spalding University in Louisville, Kentucky, drew participants from across the state and from neighboring school districts in Ohio and Tennessee. This summit had as its goal bringing together faith communities, educators, and institutions of higher education to positively impact middle and high school students to work toward high standards and make realistic plans for postsecondary education. Kentuckiana Metroversity, a coalition of colleges, universities, and seminaries in the greater Louisville area, is coordinating follow-up activities to keep alive the excitement generated at the summit. (Contact: Sister Mary Angela Shaughnessey, Spalding University, 800/896-8941)

Reading

The America Reads Challenge, an initiative of the U.S. Department of Education, is a call to all adults—parents, educators, libraries, religious institutions, universities, college students, the media, community and national groups, cultural organizations, business leaders, and senior citizens—to help ensure that every child can read well and independently by the end of the third grade. Faith communities can play an important role in the America Reads Challenge by working with students who need extra help in learning to read. Members of faith communities can provide resources and encouragement to parents in their community, collect children's books to distribute to local families, be volunteers in an ongoing reading effort in the local community, connect to a public library's summer reading program, or begin a weekly family reading program held at the faith community's facility.

The reading programs outlined below give an idea of the high level of involvement by faith communities and their members in ensuring that every child receives the gift of reading:

Alexandria (VA) Tutoring Consortium

This partnership between the Alexandria Faith Community and the Alexandria Public Elementary Schools sets as its goal to tutor young children in reading through one-on-one discussion. A congregation-based coordinator recruits tutors and assists with scheduling; a school-based coordinator acts as the building point-of-contact. Working with the school's volunteer coordinator, the classroom teacher identifies children in need of tutoring and assists with scheduling the sessions. Tutoring materials are selected by the public schools, which also provide training for the volunteer tutors. The tutor and student meet three times per week for 30 minutes each time. The qualifications for tutors are a love of reading and a love of children. (Contact: The Alexandria Tutoring Consortium, 703/549-6670)

The National Jewish Coalition for Literacy

The National Jewish Coalition for Literacy has pledged to recruit 100,000 volunteers over five years in response to the America Reads Challenge. In most instances, the coalition works with existing literacy programs to support ongoing efforts. In a few communities, it has started new partnerships. The coalition has 27 affiliates in cities as diverse as Boston (MA), Hartford (CT), Louisville (KY), Atlanta (GA), and Seattle (WA). (Contact: Craig Sumberg, Executive Director, 212/545-9215)

Foundry United Methodist Church

The Baltimore-Washington Conference of the United Methodist Church (UMC) began a summer reading program through Foundry United Methodist Church in Washington, DC, using the READ*WRITE*NOW! Program. Volunteers work with children from neighboring public schools during the summer months to provide fun and enriching reading experiences. Both volunteers and children agreed that the program was a great success! Additionally, the Baltimore area UMC churches joined an existing literacy program to extend the services offered. (Contact: Marcus Matthews, council director, 800/492-2525, ext. 435)

Faith communities' involvement in these and other partnership activities can make a real difference to children, youth, and families. *Religious Expression in Public Schools: A Statement of Principles*, and the community, parent, and teacher guidelines built from it, outline the appropriate role that faith communities can play in strengthening education, in supporting local schools, in ensuring that all children—especially those most at risk—receive the tools they need to succeed, and in making the school and the community a safe place in which to live, work, and learn.

Please share your program with us so that we might share it with others. To tell us about your success or to learn more about partnerships in the community, call 1-800-USA-LEARN or visit the U.S. Department of Education's Partnership for Family Involvement in Education Web site at http://pfie.ed.gov.

Partnerships Involving Public Schools And Faith-based Communities

Public schools forming partnerships including faith-based communities should consider and adhere to the following in developing and supporting such activities:

Things to Do:

Make sure the program has a secular purpose.

In selecting partners remain neutral between secular and religious groups and among religious groups.

Select student participants without regard to the religious affiliation of the students.

Make sure any jointly sponsored activities provided within the partnership program, wherever located, are purely secular.

Make sure any space used for the program is safe and secure for the children.

Make sure any space used by the public school for instructional purposes is free of religious symbols.

Put the partnership agreement in writing.

Things Not to Do:

Do not limit participation in the partnership, or student selection, to religious groups or certain religious groups.

Do not encourage or discourage student participation with particular partners based on the religious or secular nature of the organization.

Do not encourage or discourage students from engaging in religious activities.

Do not condition student participation in any partnership activity on membership in any religious group, or on acceptance or rejection of any religious belief, or on participation in, or refusal to participate in, any religious activity.

Do not reward or punish students (for example, in terms of grades or participation in other activities) based on their willingness to participate in any activity of a partnership with a religious organization.

Volunteers Need to be Reminded

Volunteers always need to be thanked for their willingness to volunteer their time to help children learn. At the same time, it is very important to remind volunteers from faith communities that the purpose of any partnership is educational and secular in nature, not religious, and that volunteers must respect the very strong First Amendment rights of students.

Remind volunteers:

Do not pray with the students and families or encourage them to pray during your volunteer session with them.

Do not preach about your faith to the children and their families while conducting your educational activity.

Do not prohibit or discourage speech or other activity simply because of its religious content or nature.

Do not infringe on the rights of students and their family members to speak about religion or to say a prayer or to read a Scripture, provided it is within the reasonable limits of rules for orderliness, talking, and congregating that are set for other speech and activities.

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